

Working at Height Procedure

SOP · UK · Updated 2026-07-11 · Square brackets are placeholders to replace with your own details.

A working at height procedure is the written process your team follows before and during any task where a person could fall a distance liable to cause injury — ladder and stepladder work, mezzanines and racking, roof access, or work near edges and openings. It covers how tasks are planned, which equipment is used, and what happens if something goes wrong.

Falls don't need scaffolding to be serious. In most ordinary businesses the risk lives in a stepladder in the stockroom, a wobbly chair someone grabbed to change a bulb, or an unfenced mezzanine edge. A procedure replaces "be careful" with named equipment, checks and rules that can be trained and enforced.

This template gives you the complete procedure: the avoid-prevent-minimise hierarchy, pre-task checks, ladder and stepladder rules, equipment inspection, and rescue arrangements.

Purpose and scope

This procedure sets out how [Your company] plans and carries out work at height at [site(s)/locations]. It applies to employees and contractors doing any task where a fall could cause injury, however brief the task and however low the height.

When this procedure applies

- Any use of ladders, stepladders, kick stools, podiums, towers or mobile elevating work platforms.
- Work on or near fragile surfaces: [roof lights, fibre cement roofs — list yours].
- Work near open edges, openings, stairwells, excavations, or loading areas: [mezzanine, cellar drop, vehicle beds, racking].
- Reaching stock or equipment above shoulder height where climbing is involved.
- Never improvise access — chairs, pallets, crates and shelving are not work platforms, under any time pressure.

Roles and responsibilities

- Procedure owner ([name/role]): plans and authorises work at height, keeps the equipment register, and owns the rescue arrangements.
- Competent persons ([names/roles]): trained for the equipment they use; only they carry out work at height tasks.
- Managers and supervisors: check the plan exists before the task starts and stop any improvised access on sight.
- All staff: report defective equipment, damaged flooring or missing edge protection to [role] immediately.

Plan the work: avoid, prevent, minimise

- Avoid: do the work from the ground where reasonably practicable — extendable tools, lowering stock storage, assembling at ground level before installing.
- Prevent: where height can't be avoided, use equipment that stops a fall happening — guardrails, a podium or tower, a properly fenced platform.
- Minimise: where some fall risk remains, reduce the distance and consequences — and treat personal fall-arrest as the last resort, never the default.
- Any task using fall-arrest equipment needs a rescue plan agreed before work starts — a person suspended in a harness needs rescuing quickly, and 999 is not a rescue plan on its own.

Before you start

1. Confirm the task is covered by a current risk assessment and this procedure; if not, stop and speak to [role].
2. For outdoor work, check the weather — postpone in [wind/rain/ice conditions per your assessment].
3. Select the equipment named in the plan; do not substitute whatever is nearest.
4. Carry out a pre-use check of the equipment (see next sections) and reject anything defective.
5. Set an exclusion zone below the work area and protect it with [cones/barriers/a colleague].
6. Confirm someone knows the work is happening — work at height is never done alone unless the assessment explicitly allows it.

Ladder and stepladder rules

1. Check before use: stiles not bent or split, rungs sound, feet present and gripping, locking mechanisms working.
2. Stand the ladder on firm, level, dry ground — never on boxes, pallets or uneven surfaces.
3. Set leaning ladders at the angle in HSE guidance (about one unit out for every four up) and secure or foot them per your assessment.
4. Maintain three points of contact, and keep your belt buckle between the stiles — move the ladder rather than overreach.
5. Carry tools in a belt or holster so both hands are free for climbing.
6. Use ladders only for low-risk, short-duration work — if the task runs long ([HSE guidance uses around 30 minutes as a rule of thumb]) or needs force or both hands, choose a podium, tower or platform instead.

Equipment inspection and maintenance

- All work-at-height equipment is listed in a register at [location]: [ladders, stepladders, podiums, towers, harnesses — list yours], each with an ID.
- Pre-use checks by the user, every use — no check, no climb.
- Recorded inspections by [competent person/role] at [frequency — set from manufacturer instructions and current HSE guidance for each equipment type].

- Defective equipment is tagged, removed from use immediately, and repaired or destroyed — never left where a busy colleague might grab it.
- Hired or borrowed equipment is checked and added to the register before first use.

If something goes wrong

1. Stop the task and make the area safe.
2. If someone has fallen, call 999 and do not move them unless they are in immediate danger.
3. If someone is suspended in a harness, start the rescue plan immediately and call 999 — suspension itself is a medical emergency.
4. Report every fall, dropped object or near miss through our accident and incident reporting procedure the same shift.
5. Do not resume the task until the assessment and plan have been reviewed by [role].

Records and review

The equipment register, inspection records, training records and task plans are kept in [system/location] and retained for [period]. This procedure is reviewed [frequency, e.g. annually], after any fall or near miss, and when equipment, premises or tasks change. Owner: [name/role]. Next review due: [date].

How to use this template

1. Walk the site and list every task done off the ground, however small — the stockroom stepladder counts as much as the roof.
2. Apply the avoid step seriously before buying anything: lowering where stock is kept removes more risk than any ladder rule.
3. Build the equipment register as you edit section 7 — number each ladder physically so pre-use checks attach to a real item.
4. Bin or destroy every improvised access object (that chair, that pallet) the day you publish; removing the option is the control.
5. Agree the rescue arrangements before anyone uses fall-arrest equipment, and rehearse them once.
6. Train the rules with the actual equipment in the actual spaces, and set the review date and owner before publishing.

Official guidance

- › [HSE — Working at height](#)

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